

VZCZCXRO8147
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DE RUEHAS #1350/01 3661848
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 311848Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6796
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY 6608
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY PRIORITY 1803
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO PRIORITY 0813
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 2987
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 9149
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001350

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/31/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIAN MFA: DANGEROUS SPLIT BETWEEN REGIMES AND STREET OVER GAZA

REF: ALGIERS 1340

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: MFA Secretary General Madjid Bouguerra assured the Ambassador on December 31 that Algeria would continue to play a constructive role in formulating Arab League reactions to the situation in Gaza, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric. Bouguerra said that Algerians were shocked and traumatized by the images coming out of Gaza, and that Arab public opinion held that only the U.S. could effectively put an end to the violence. This was a time, he said, if ever there was one, for the U.S. to use its weight. According to Bouguerra, Arab public opinion was now "dangerously split" from Arab leaders, and populations blamed their regimes for inaction and impotence in the face of the Israeli actions in Gaza. Managing this opinion, he said, was the immediate challenge for Algeria and the rest of the Arab world. Bouguerra said that Algeria had never held any affection for Hamas, but Hamas had won a democratic election and it could not be excluded from Palestinian decisionmaking. This made Palestinian reconciliation essential. With several hours to go before the conclusion of the Cairo Arab League Ministerial on Gaza, Bouguerra projected an outcome that included a call for a cease-fire, removal of the blockade, and a call for UNSC action. Finally, Bouguerra expressed Algerian frustration that its initial shipment of 61 tons of food and medical aid for Gaza had only received clearance from Egypt earlier that same day, after several days of delays. END SUMMARY.

AMBASSADOR URGES CONSTRUCTIVE ARAB ROLE

12. (C) The Ambassador told Bouguerra that the U.S. realized Algeria's voice carried weight in Arab League discussions. We therefore sought the GOA's help in ensuring a constructive and non-inflammatory AL ministerial statement. He noted the need for a cease-fire that would be fully respected, and the importance of Arab countries using their influence to ensure that Hamas respected any cease-fire, if one were achieved. The Ambassador further noted the personal engagement of the President and the Secretary, their concern about civilian casualties, and their attention to the humanitarian crisis, including our USD 85 million contribution to UNWRA. He added that Israel would doubtless pay close attention to the tenor of the Arab League statement and this meant it could be a significant factor in our ability to achieve a genuine cease-fire. The Ambassador said it would be helpful if the AL statement endorsed a return to the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, since this would address the humanitarian issue, and if it also could address the problem of the passage of contraband, especially weapons, into Gaza.

SHOCKED AND AWED

13. (C) Bouguerra said graphic images of suffering in Gaza had been saturating Algerian homes via Arab satellite channels for days, and had "shocked and traumatized" Algerians. He called it a situation that "forbids us from remaining silent" and forces action, which, he said, must start with the friends of Israel, specifically the U.S. Bouguerra said Algerians had never seen a situation quite like this, in which "an enclosed people" were bombed with little or no option to escape. Arabs, he said, are also upset at the U.S. because they perceive that the U.S. can stop the violence but thus far has not. He told the Ambassador that he had just heard that Israel had rejected an EU cease-fire initiative driven by French president Nicolas Sarkozy. He said the Arab League was prepared to push the Palestinians back on track, but "only if we have the support of our partners." This was a time, if ever there was one, for the U.S. to use its weight.

ALGERIA EXPECTS SUMMIT DELAY

14. (C) Bouguerra, who had spoken to Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci in Cairo earlier that afternoon, said Algeria would play a constructive role in the Arab League deliberations, and understood this was not a moment for inflammatory rhetoric. He said Arab League foreign ministers were "aware of the seriousness" of the situation and were ready to help with pushing a peace effort. Bouguerra said that Medelci had

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stopped briefly in Tripoli en route to Cairo, for a meeting of the five Maghreb foreign ministers, in order to forge a common position heading into the Cairo ministerial. From his earlier conversation with Medelci, Bouguerra said he expected that elements of the Arab League position were likely to include calls for a cease-fire, an end to the blockade, and UN Security Council action. Bouguerra speculated that an actual follow-on full summit of the Arab League would be delayed slightly, at least by a matter of days, given the rifts of opinion among member states. Also unfortunate, Bouguerra said, was that the recent escalation of violence in Gaza had adversely affected other issues, including the indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel.

15. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question about Hamas' possible motives for breaking the cease-fire, Bouguerra said he did not know Hamas' intentions, but they had cited the blockade of Gaza as a primary factor. It was essential, the MFA secretary general said, for the Palestinian leaderships in the West Bank and Gaza to be reconciled. Algeria had no affection for Hamas, but it had won a democratic election and could not be excluded from Palestinian decisionmaking. Trying to do so would only make matters worse. And could Israel destroy Hamas definitively, Bouguerra wondered? "I think not," he opined.

CRISIS OF PUBLIC OPINION

16. (C) The most immediate problem for regimes throughout the Arab world, in Bouguerra's view, was the "very dangerous" distance that existed between Arab public opinion and Arab leaders. He explained that Arabs were directing much of their anger at their leaders for insufficient action and coordination of policy and response. He said the general public was frustrated that Arab leaders had not voiced positions that more accurately reflected their own anger at Israel, the U.S., and even Egypt for its role in the blockade. Managing public opinion, Bouguerra told the Ambassador, was the immediate challenge for Algeria and the rest of the Arab world.

FRUSTRATION WITH EGYPT

17. (C) Bouguerra confirmed that Algeria had provided 61 tons of food and medical supplies to Gaza, but had waited five days to get clearance from Egyptian authorities to fly the supplies to the airport at El Arish. He said that the Algerian public believed that this aid had already been delivered, but since Egyptian clearance had only come earlier in the day, Algerian relief flights would be leaving tomorrow, January 1. The 61 tons were "a beginning," he said, asserting that Algeria had provided such aid in the past and would continue to do so in the future. We do not know Egypt's intentions, he confided, hoping that this would be clearer "in a few hours" when the Cairo ministerial wrapped up.

COMMENT

18. (C) Ambassador repeatedly underscored the seriousness of the situation, and that the nature of the Arab League statement and subsequent actions would play a decisive role in determining what Israeli response followed, including whether the process would be brought back on track through a cease-fire respected by all parties. Bouguerra understood what was at stake, and told the Ambassador that Algeria was proud to have a reputation for moderation and reason within the Arab League. He said that the U.S. could count on Algeria to avoid inflammatory statements and emotional responses, but he was obviously sobered by what he felt to be the very dangerous limitations that public opinion was placing on Arab regimes. It was in this context that he asked if the Ambassador thought Israel would "really go through" with a land assault. The Ambassador responded that he could claim no special insight on this, but based on his own experience in Jerusalem and the public statements of Israeli officials, it seemed pretty clear that the key to the Israelis' next steps lay in whether they concluded that Hamas had definitively stopped firing rockets or not. That was why any cease-fire would have to be fully respected, and why Arab influence on Hamas to respect any such agreement would be so important.

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PEARCE